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A Eulogy for a Sister

Rena Berliner

The streets of the city were practically deserted on that memorable oppressively hot day of August 19, '42. I remember running breathlessly, sweat pouring down my back and face. My heart was pounding and I was filled with a dreadful premonition of terror.

I had heard that everybody who worked at the firm "Stadtische Werkstatte" was taken to Janowska Concentration Camp.

My sister Finia was employed there. Father brought two sawing machines and used a lot of influence to have her accepted for work at the factory, which was finishing uniforms for the German army.

We were told that this was surely the safest and most secure place and that people there will be protected from "actions" and deportations. Finia, my little sister, was only fourteen, two years younger than I was. She was pretty, sweet and very well developed for a child her age.

I kept thinking and hoping against hope that even the most hardened S.S. man could not possibly hurt her and take her along with the rest of the people after seeing her innocent gentle face.

Completely exhausted - it was a long way from where I worked - I finally reached the "Stadtische Werkstatte."

Forty years have since passed but I can still see the empty deserted halls of the factory and hear myself shouting my sister's name. Only an echo answered. Endless, tremendous rooms filled with machines and all kind of materials and supplies and not a living soul present.

I had to go home and tell my parents what happened.

On the street, a Ukrainian policeman stopped me and asked for my "kennkarte." It was a "good" one and he let me go.

Crying I inquired as to what had happened to the people from the "Stadtische Werkstatte" and he answered smirking: "Oh, they are on their way to the soap factory. Slowly but surely we will get rid of you all you dirty Yids."

When I arrived home, Mama was standing at the window crying, she just saw open trucks full of people, driving towards Janowska Concentration Camp (we lived on Janowska Street) and Finia among them. There were hundreds of people in the trucks but somehow Mama managed to see her.

We worried that Finia had only a thin summer dress on, because we were absolutely sure that everyone was taken to the camp only to be sent out from there to work.

It wasn't so. People caught in "actions" in Lwow were sent either to an extermination camp in Belzec, where nobody lived longer than a few hours, or were shot on the sands of Janowska Concentration Camp, where my father died a few months later.

I think of you often, my dear little sister, and hurt knowing how frightened you must have been in the last hours of your young life.

You grew up surrounded by love, warmth and gentleness.

Young as you were, you were taught to love and trust people and you believed in their goodness and compassion. Yet it was meant for you to die deserted and alone.

On this fortieth anniversary of your untimely death, I hope that in the minutes before the light of your young life was so cruelly extinguished, and when the deadly gas (cyclon) started dripping from the opening in the ceiling, some kind soul held you in her arms, and that you died quickly and without the feeling of being abandoned.

You were only fourteen when death came to you in the cruelest of ways. You never knew the love of a man or the joy of motherhood. You were never kissed and experienced so little of the pleasures and sorrow of just being alive.

You have no grave, my little sister, where I can mourn you except the one in my heart.

I will always think of you for as long as I shall live.

May your saintly memory be a blessing to all the people who survived and lived, their children and grandchildren and may humanity never forget of what has happened because "forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.

